Teacher learning in the age of possibility

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I dwell in Possibility
A fairer house than Prose,
More numerous of windows,
Superior of doors.
– Emily Dickinson

These are exciting times to become involved in teacher education. We live, literally, in an age of possibility, one in which we are constantly experiencing huge leaps in our understanding of what becoming a teacher entails. An age in which the sky seems to be the limit as far as knowledge about teacher learning and development are concerned. Over the past twenty years, research on teacher education and, more precisely on teacher learning has experienced a renewed impetus. Driven by the need to understand why teachers succeed or fail, we have witnessed a plethora of approaches to teacher learning encompassing such disparate areas as teaching skills, teacher beliefs or teacher cognition (Borg, 2007).

This quest for understanding the nuances of the processes involved in becoming a professional of teaching has yielded various proposals for action. These have ranged from the traditional college-of-education-based models to school-based teacher education. However, above and beyond these models of how to "do" teacher education, the notion of reflection in and on action (Schön, 1983) together with the realization that teacher learning is both a personal and a social endeavor have become two of the pillars of our field. Our role has shifted from that of being a provider of knowledge to becoming an expert on learning. As Tripp (1993: 5) explains it "Being able to do something and knowing how one does it are two different aspects of being a professional...Understanding what it is one does and how one does it, involves a different aspect of professionalism: it is a matter of being intellectually expert about expert practice."

One of the most powerful teacher education and development strategies to surface over the past two decades is Mentoring, a process which has had many incarnations given its relatively short history. This fact notwithstanding the benefits which can be reaped from becoming involved in this strategy of professional learning seem to indicate that it may hold the answer to many of the problems that face our profession nowadays.

In this article, I aim at making explicit the theoretical underpinnings of and current understandings about teacher learning in the context of Mentoring relationships. In attempting to do so, I touch on issues of learning, identity, becoming and knowing. The subsequent articles in this collection develop specific areas of Mentoring derived from the situated understandings of participants in a Mentor Preparation course developed by the Modern Foreign Languages Department of the Council for Teacher Education in Uruguay in late 2009.

It is our hope that this volume contributes to the establishment of a "culture of Mentoring" in the public and private education sectors in the belief that mediated teacher learning activity can prove to have a powerful influence on quality student learning.

The case for Mentoring

This book is a collection of essays intended to serve the purpose of providing language teaching professionals with a knowledge base for the development of Mentoring skills and dispositions.

By this we mean a process, in which one colleague supports another colleague's personal and professional development, provides scaffolding for professional learning, assists with professional transitions, or performs any other activity oriented towards the colleague's progress in the profession. Malderez (2009: 260) defines it thus: "[I see] a Mentoring process as being supportive of the transformation of development of the mentee and of their acceptance into a professional community…It is this process of one-to-one, workplace-based, contingent and personally appropriate support for the person during their professional acclimatization (or integration), learning, growth and development, which is referred to as Mentoring."

Malderez' emphasis on the person and on others cannot be overstated. In the past thirty years, research on teacher learning has shifted from an analysis of what "goes on in the classroom" (i.e. a teacher's visible actions), to a consideration of how communities of practitioners shape their practices around an activity and, in doing so, how they significantly affect the activity. This engagement in/through participation has helped re-conceptualize our understanding of "learning" (Lave and Wenger, 1991) by providing an alternative view as to how humans engage in the construction and re-construction of their experiences. Seen in this new light, learning is not the appropriation of knowledge, skills or disposition by an individual from the outside in, but rather collective participation in momentous activity where meaning is constantly negotiated and new understandings emerge. In this sense the new conceptions of teacher learning advocate for a decidedly Vygotskyan perspective thus providing a sociocultural turn (Johnson, 2009) to how we see an interpret teacher learning.

Tomlinson (1995: 26) explains how "Vygotsky pointed out that most human capacities are not learned in isolation and probably couldn't be anyway. They're learned with the help of other people, who assist the learner to perform actions in pursuit of outcomes meaningful to that learner. In everyday terms, we might put this view of teaching or skill development as assisted learning by doing."

If this is so, then, the Mentoring process carries with it the potential to boost professional and personal learning while at the same time, reaching out, through ripple effects, to the whole educational community. However, if the Mentoring process is to be thoroughly understood, familiarization with how teachers participate in communities of practice is a pre-requisite. Otherwise, one runs the risk of seeing Mentoring as a surefire, person-proof collection of procedures to be applied to a teacher. In essence, Mentoring is meaningful activity done with teachers, and it is to a consideration of these issues which we now turn.

Re-conceptualizing teacher learning

Teacher learning is a complex, life-long endeavor to which all professionals in education should commit from the onset of their careers. However, the ways in which teachers are educated around the world exhibit common patterns which are cause for concern since they directly contradict current perspectives emphasizing the collective, thus forcing newcomers to find their way into the profession in isolation and relying mostly on the transmission of "received" theories and methods. This view severely constrains the possibilities afforded to teachers to engage in career-long learning efforts by curtailing their chance of exploring their own and

their colleagues' practice, and rendering them incapable of producing meaningful situated knowledge about teaching and learning. As Freire (2000: 75) aptly put it "The argument that the teaching of content, deposited in the learner, will sooner or later bring about a critical perception of reality does not convince me. In the progressive perspective, the process of teaching—where the teaching challenges learners to apprehend the object, to then learn it in their relations with the world—implies the exercise of critical perception, perception of the object's reasons for being. It implies the sharpening of the learner's epistemological curiosity, which cannot be satisfied with the mere description of the object's concept."

Despite all the theoretical contributions to the field, teacher learning continues to be perceived as stemming principally from initial teacher education courses where aspiring professionals are instructed (and inducted) into teaching through theoretical courses and focused practicum experiences. This has resulted in the constraints of the present reality in which novices tend to leave the profession after the first three or four year. Various research projects (Hobson, Ashby, Malderez and Tomlinson, 2009) have been undertaken to study this situation and they all seem to conclude that one of the reasons it remains unchanged is because novices lack adequate support structures to help them become full-fledged members of the communities they work in. In other words, they are denied full participation and membership in the community, and hence, the possibility of pursuing career-long learning.

Given the dismal retention and performance rates of many teacher education systems around the world, it seems clear that the prevalent culture of isolation as experienced by professionals has failed, and that new ways of conceiving the profession need to be advanced. Recent developments in the field seem to indicate that teacher learning and development are both personal and social constructions which need to feed on theory and practice alike and situated within communities committed to developing the practice of education. This alternative view calls for the enactment of a perspective on teacher learning which sees it as constructed by groups of peers who engage in situated negotiation of meanings: in our case, the school. Schoonmaker (2002:3) points out that "Teacher development may be seen as socially constructed. Teachers tend to grow along similar lines, as developmental stage theory suggests, but this growth and development reflect the powerful force of schools as agencies of socialization. So potent is this process of socialization that the effects of teacher preparation tend to be washed out when neophyte teachers enter the school."

In this new light, teacher learning is seen as engagement in the situated activities of communities of practice, a concept developed in 1991 by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. The authors explain the concept thus, "Learning viewed as situated activity has as its central defining characteristic a process that we call legitimate peripheral participation. By this we mean to draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community. Legitimate peripheral participation provides a way to speak about the relations between newcomers and old-timers, and about activities, identities, artifacts, and communities of knowledge and practice." (Lave and Wenger, 1991:29)

It is evident from the alarming data on teacher retention that college courses are not sufficient in promoting a culture of learning as participation and that belonging to school communities proves difficult for many novice teachers. In fact, reality shows that novice teachers are generally assigned to the most difficult schools catering for the most deprived populations without providing them with adequate means to navigate those difficult waters.

Those who succeed and remain in schools do so generally, at the expense of considerable emotional and academic investments. We may thus conclude with Johnson (2009: 12) that, "Most of what teachers learn actually occurs in on-the-job initiation into the practices of teaching, rather than in professional teacher education programs." If this is, indeed, the case, educational systems should provide novices with structures which would allow them to engage with professional learning from the moment they decide to become educators.

The present volume attempts to provide one plausible response to this paradox. In advancing the case for Mentoring as a structure for teacher induction and support, we are advocating for a view of teacher learning which sees it as the commitment of individuals to action, oriented towards enhancing their practices in the context of highly situated communities and with the support of colleagues and other interested peers who are concerned with both their personal and professional growth. The essays in this volume are the product of the collective (and collegial) reflections of a group of concerned language teaching professionals facing the challenge of supporting the development of their peers for the first time. In attempting to build a knowledge base on Mentoring they have explored the nuances of the task and come up with new understandings of what teaching and learning mean in a highly connected professional world.

Their essays depict how they have renamed their practices while tracing their own collective development of Discourses that go from local to professional. Freeman (1996: 222) explains that "Renaming is a crucial feature of the process [of teacher learning] whereby teachers renegotiate the meaning of their actions and thus construct different, more critical, ways of understanding what they are doing in their classrooms…To do so entails a shift in research perspective from examining actions to examining the perceptions on which those actions are based."

Another salient feature of this collection is its purposeful engagement with school-based practices as the milieu in which Mentoring actions take place. These actions are oriented towards disclosing the true knowledge base of teaching, in an attempt to depart from the "chalk and talk" practices favored by many teacher education systems around the world.

This perspective is not without its limitations, though. School-based teacher learning and development may reproduce the status quo at the same time that they offer fertile ground for a thoughtful exploration of practices through building support networks. As Shoonmaker (2002: 134) explains "There is a place for discussion of the appropriate knowledge base of teaching. However, such discussions too frequently reduce teaching to the act of applying or transmitting knowledge and best ways to do this in schools. Dwayne Huebner (1985) has argued that one of the problems with schools is that they 'are not places of knowing, but places of knowledge.' Knowledge suggests being informed, understanding things, having wisdom, and being enlightened. Knowledge focuses us on bodies of accumulated information and principles. Coming to know suggests meaning-making that draws on bodies of accumulated information and principles but also draws on multiple sources of meaning, including prior knowledge and practical experience."

Hence, the approach the authors have taken in developing these essays is one decidedly oriented towards helping teachers develop knowing rather than knowledge. In the words of Malderez and Wedell (2007: 19) the authors explore knowing about, how and to teach:

"Knowing about (KA)
What teachers know about and use in their thinking includes:
- Their subject, the aims and role of the subject within the wider curriculum.
- How the subject is learnt, the existence of strategies to support learning.
- The school and its policies, accepted norms and procedures within the education system.
- The students, their backgrounds, their needs.
- Strategies for managing their own ongoing professional learning, the existence of professional organizations and support networks, and journals in their subject area.

Knowing how (KH)
The expertise of teachers includes being able to:
- Use strategies to support pupils and their own learning.
- Notice important features of classrooms and organizations.
- Promote conditions which support the learning process.
- Assess learning.
- Relate to students, other professionals, parents and colleagues.
- Fulfill other professional obligations.
- Access and use new ideas and/or theories to think, plan and/or assess.

Knowing to (KT)
The expertise developed over time by 'good teachers' allows them to:
- Intuitively and instantaneously use what they know (whether it is knowing about or knowing how type of knowledge) at just the right moment, and in just the right way to support the learning of their particular learners, in their classroom."

Ultimately, teaching is an activity which should serve the purpose of helping others come to know (Tomlinson, 1995). Unless students learn, teaching is rendered futile. However, when one looks at the harsh reality of schools nowadays one is entitled to wonder how teachers can fulfill their mission in isolation. And here is where the Mentoring process provides a valuable instance for teachers to engage in professional conversations about teaching and learning with a view to reshaping their practices in the service of their learners. In engaging in these professional dialogs, Mentors and mentees revisit their assumptions, question their beliefs and explore new ways of helping learners engage in meaningful experiences which promote learning. Mentoring thus becomes a new form of commitment, a new window, or door (in Dickinson's words) into the worlds of being, knowing and becoming.

Identity, naming, knowing and conflict

Identity is about being, but also about becoming, and thus constitutes a foundation stone in the process of teacher learning. Our identities as teachers are fashioned upon knowledge and skills, but also through engagement in the experience of teaching and interaction with students and peers. In this sense, engagement in the Mentoring process can also be seen as a way of helping teachers (mentors and mentees alike) develop their professional identities in that, through participation in the process, both negotiate new meanings about their roles, beliefs, theories and responsibilities. As Miller Marsh (2003, in Clarke, 2008:9) aptly explains "We are continually in the process of fashioning, and refashioning our identities by patching together fragments of the discourses to which we are exposed…understanding how teachers fashion their identities is especially important, since much of the work that is done in the classrooms by teachers and their students involves the crafting of identities with and for one another."

One of the key issues in fashioning our identities and which allows us to negotiate meanings in our quest to gain full membership in the community is the language we use. As an outsider to a community, and even as a newcomer, we may be unaware of the nuances that certain meanings have to the old-timers in that community. The Mentoring process can serve as the catalyst through which local language can become professional language. Freeman (1996: 227 – 228) explains that "Local language is the vehicle through which teachers explain what goes on in their teaching on a daily basis; it is the means of expressing—to themselves and to colleagues—the conceptions of practice which they bring to teaching as well as those which they are socialized on in the job…Professional language… is itself a Discourse, built upon a set of socially constructed facts and procedures out of which a different identity can be fashioned. Articulation comes when the teachers combine the new professional language of the teacher education program with their local language explanations to reflect on and critique their practice."

Again, the social and situated nature of the language that teachers use surfaces as a conflictive area where further negotiations of meaning are needed. Likewise, the nature of the term identity can prove to be a debatable issue in that there does not seem to be a consensus of what is meant by the term. The conceptualization of the role of identity in the development of teacher learning has been the center of many a controversy and the subject of various research projects. Theories of teacher learning have impacted the field and shifted our understanding of the term. Malderez and Wedell (2007: 15) trace these developments thus: "More recent views of teaching learning see identity and (inter)personal skills development as integral components of planned processes for teacher preparation. Socio-cultural perspectives see teacher learning as coming about through increasing degrees of participation in and membership of a culture of teachers in a given context…There are also cognitive views of teacher learning, with (social) constructivism being the most common. Such views emphasize the importance of engaging the learner in personal meaning-making and, in social constructivism, the important role that interaction with others plays in the process is again highlighted. Constructivist views relate to the goal of the reflective practitioner and the focus on the thinking and concepts that lie behind the action. Finally there is also skill theory which sees 'intelligent action' as being developed through cyclical processes of supported trial and error…"

Regardless of the perspective one advocates for, the fact remains that teacher learning is tightly bound to the development of one's identity. We come to develop our professional identity through participation in the activity of teaching with others. In that process, meaning is negotiated and reified (Wenger, 1998), new understandings emerge and legitimate participation is gained through a process of constant flux from periphery to the center. This process calls for purposeful collaboration. However, one must be wary about assuming that collaboration will be the instant outcome of the Mentoring process. Any form of collaboration entails a conflict (Schoonmaker, 2002) in which issues of power and control surface and affect the interaction. Here is where the knowledge base of the mentor comes into play and where they can use the Mentoring skills learnt and developed over time to the advantage of the mentee. While it may be true that learning occurs in communities (Lave and Wenger, 1991), not all communities are full functional and conflicts are bound to occur. This is a natural phenomenon in that gaining the right to participate means establishing relationships for the purpose of becoming involved in action. Here one runs the risk of "stepping into someone else's toes," displacing other members, or contributing new aspects to the activity with which others may be uncomfortable. The Mentoring process can minimize these negative effects by providing a physical and emotional space where these tensions can be brought out into the open and examined. Participation thus refers to "a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process. It suggests both action and connection…[it is]

the social experience of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises. Participation in this sense is both personal and social." (Wenger, 1998: 55 - 56)

All in all, Mentoring provides a safe haven where mentors and mentees are able to develop flexible identities and thus become adaptive experts who "…are able to master the skills and strategies to plan, manage, carry out, and assess the activities of teaching and learning while at the same time adapting and adjusting to the complexities that are embedded in those activities in order to make sound instructional decisions within the contexts in which they teach." (Johnson, 2009: 10)

The theory/practice divide or… to actually "dwell in possibility"

As it has been said before, one of the many hurdles teachers experience in their professional development is the constant tension between what is required of them by theory and what they actually experience in practice. The Mentoring process seems like an ideal milieu in which this divide could be resolved. In approaching the Mentoring relationship, mentor and mentee work their way from local to professional language. It is in the sharing of experiences, in the careful observation of practice and the ensuing reflection that theory and practice begin to feed one another.

While the tension between theory and practice continues to be the center of many debates in teacher education, in recent years a number of theoreticians have begun exploring ways of bridging that divide. Such is the case with the work of Loughran (2006) who, referencing Kessel and Korthagen (2001, cited in Loughran, op. cit.) proposes going back to the Aristotelian differentiation between episteme and phronesis. These two constructs are described by Loughran (op.cit.: 63 – 64) when he says that "Episteme is Theory with a Big T. It is expert knowledge of a particular problem derived from scientific understandings. It is propositional and as such, is of a general form applicable to a variety of different situations and formulated in abstract terms. Episteme is cognitive in nature 'unaffected by emotion or desires. It is the knowledge that is of major importance, the specific situation and context being only an instance for the application of the knowledge.' Phronesis is theory with a small t, it is practical wisdom; it is knowledge of the particularities of a situation.

It is knowledge of the concrete, not the abstract. This practical knowledge is perceptual and uses rules 'only as summaries and guides…[and requires] enough proper experience. For particulars only become familiar with experience, with a long process of perceiving, assessing situations, judging, choosing courses of action, and being confronted with their consequences. This generates a sort of insight that is altogether different from scientific knowledge. (Kessel and Korthagen, 2001:27)."

This rather extensive quote can be justified by its powerful implications within a sociocultural perspective. Episteme could be also understood as the productions of old-timers in a community of practice which gave way to what is considered "received knowledge" and coded in the form of principles which rule the activity. When newcomers begin to gain legitimate peripheral participation in the community, they do so by enacting their own and a collective phronesis which is also embedded in the community. This phronesis has the power to inform, dispute, confirm or reclaim episteme which may lie outside or inside the community. In the Mentoring process, both episteme and phronesis are called upon at all times as a way of informing the interaction between mentor and mentee. What is interesting about this interaction is that it brings to bear episteme and phronesis which come from two distinct communities of practice (those of the mentor and the mentee, respectively).

These are subject to scrutiny and allow for negotiation and reification of new meanings in the light of the situated reality in which mentor and mentee work. Thus, the boundaries of the source communities of mentor and mentee begin to blur allowing for the renaming and reconstruction of experience in an interactive continuum spanning all the actors in the situation. It is an opportunity for mentor and mentee alike to access and integrate new understandings about the acts of teaching and learning. Or, as Malderez (2009: 264) puts it "Potentially, school-based Mentoring has a unique and important contribution to make to language teacher learning, in particular to the development of noticing skills, professional thinking and learning from experience, as well as to mentee's integration of knowledges of various kinds."

One inherent consequence to this interaction is that the Mentoring process may serve the purpose of contesting "received" professional knowledge as well as deeply-held beliefs in the community which, in turn, may add to the logical tension which ensues from the interaction. But with inherent dangers, come great opportunities. Grant and Vonzell (2008: 184) explain that "[The fact that] destabilizing dominant discourses of … teachers is 'dangerous work' continues to raise questions about both the knowledge, skills and dispositions that participation in an improved and more desirable form of social life requires for groups of people who have historically been marginalized...a social justice discourse in education needs to allow teacher educators to ascertain how power (e.g. pedagogical and institutional) and resources (e.g. material, opportunity and outcomes) are distributed to individuals and social groups."

In this sense, Mentoring becomes an opportunity for conscientization and liberation (Freire, 1972). The Mentoring process becomes a turf in which critical attitudes towards teaching, learning, knowing, knowledge and identity can be disclosed, discussed and reconceptualised.
In looking at practice through critical, yet theory-laden, eyes, that is, in bringing to bear episteme and phronesis in such a way that reflection prompts action and action brings about reflection, the way towards true praxis is paved. In the words of Freire (1972: 131) "People will be truly critical if they live the plenitude of their praxis, that is, if their action encompasses a critical reflection which increasingly organizes their thinking and thus leads them to move from a purely naïve knowledge of reality to a higher level, one which enables them to perceive the causes of reality."

The Mentoring process thus becomes a true catalyst for change, but also for the negotiation and reification of new meanings, thus affording mentees full participation in the practices of the teaching community. While this happens, new ways of approaching complex, everyday problems are explored and found through responsible and true teaching praxis. This leads to the development of situated understandings about reality and brings with it the potential to result in teaching which is more socially just for teachers and students alike.

Hence, Mentoring as a strategy for life-long teacher learning becomes a tool, in Vygotskyan terms, which allows communities of teachers, mentors and learners to transcend the classroom thus holding the promise of a better future for all. I would conclude with Clarke (2007:75) that "Teaching in today's political and institutional climate requires thoughtful approaches to complex problems of practice; there are no past answers to the problems we face, and we do not have the luxury of focusing exclusively on the classroom and our students. We need to take an active role in shaping the school environment so that we can teach effectively in our classrooms. This means that we often need to teach others—colleagues, administrators, parents or sponsors—how they can participate effectively in our change efforts." Mentoring affords us the chance of doing precisely that.

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